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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the theory of psychosynthesis and suggests how it may be applied to the facilitation of adventure groups. Robert Assagioli's theory of psychosynthesis emphasizes inner psychological parts or elements and their interrelationships. He theorizes that integration or synthesis of these elements is possible. The goal then of psychosynthesis is wholeness, the integration of the psychological elements. Five key concepts of the model are: (1) the Self; (2) the "I"; (3) subpersonalities; (4) identification; and (5) disidentification. The Self is the true center of a person's identity and individuality, containing all the unique qualities and capacities. Normal daily consciousness is not of the Self, but of the "I", which is the reflection of the Self at the level of the personality. The personality is composed of numerous subpersonalities, recognizable as the different roles we play. In psychosynthesis terms, the "I" can identify with and have awareness of the various elements of the psyche. When the "I" consciously chooses to move awareness from one element to another, that process is called disidentification followed by identification. Adventure counselors and facilitators can use the concept of subpersonalities to identify, understand, and accept personality patterns on the part of the individual and on the part of the group in support of the individual. The facilitator can choose initiatives and challenges that will encourage the group to deal with subpersonality patterns and look for alternatives. (KS)

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PSYCHOSYNTHESIS AND ADVENTURE COUNSELING

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Abstract

A variety of psychological theories are used to plan and facilitate adventure group activities and counseling. As adventure counselors work to improve their facilitation skills and to establish adventure activities as an effective approach to group counseling, it is important that all potentially relevant theories are examined so that facilitators can expand their thinking, styles and interventions. One theory that may be particularly useful is psychosynthesis, developed by the Italian psychiatrist, Roberto Assagioli. The purposes of this paper are to briefly describe the basic concepts and principles of psychosynthesis and to suggest how they might be applied to the facilitation of adventure groups. The specific concepts discussed will be: the Self, subpersonalities, the "I", and identification and disidentification.

Introduction

Psychosysnthesis, a theory of psychological growth and functioning developed by Roberto Assagioli (1965, 1973), has rich implications for how leaders use adventure experiences to facilitate group and individual development. There are three reasons why psychosynthesis can be useful to adventure facilitators. First, as a theory of psychological functioning, it provides a way to think about counseling and the specific means to do counseling. Second, psychosynthesis is experiential by nature and lends itself well to the action-oriented needs of outdoor leaders. Gordon (1991) emphasizes the experiential aspect of psychosynthesis:

> I don't use "understand" here in the purely intellectual sense of the word. Psychosynthesis cannot be understood without *doing* . To gain this deeper understanding, to grasp the transformational possibilities of this approach, one needs to enter into the actual work, the real choices and the necessary skillful effort.

Third, because it is a transpersonal approach, unlike other psychological theories, it includes the experience of spirituality. An important reason to lead groups in natural environments is to facilitate experiences that are less likely to occur indoors, particularly "a sense of oneness, of joy, of truth, of connection to all beings, of connection to God" (Gordon, 1991). Experiences of the "spirit" can be integrated into the planning and practice of adventure programs, something that is not as easily done within traditional psychological theories. (This paper will not discuss the relationship of the spiritual aspects of the theory to adventure counseling. Readers interested in transpersonal psychology and outdoor education should see Brown, 1989.)

The Theoretical Concepts of Psychosynthesis

Many theories explain human behavior by separating internal human functioning into parts, elements or processes. Freud's id, ego and superego is probably the best known example. Berne described inner functioning and outward behavior in terms of three ego states: the adult, the parent and the child. Perls saw the interactions between the "top dog" and the "underdog" as accounting for the daily struggles that many

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people experience (Gordon, 1991). More recent contributions to the theory and practice of counseling also recognize the usefulness of thinking about the individual as engaging in "private dialogue" (Beck, 1976), "self-talk" (Ellis, 1962), interacting with "inner companions" and personal "subparts" (Mahoney, 1991) and "multiple selves" (Nichols, 1991).

Assagioli dramatically emphasized inner psychological parts or elements and their interrelationships because he noticed that "a great deal of psychological pain, imbalance, and meaninglessness are felt when our diverse inner elements exist unconnected side by side or clash with one another" (Ferrucci, 1982). He also noticed that an integration or synthesis of these elements was possible. The goal then of psychosynthesis is wholeness, the integration of the psychological elements in service of a person's deepest values and qualities.

Figure 1 shows the psychosynthesis map of the psyche. Rather than discuss the full model, this paper will introduce five of its key concepts: subpersonalities, the "I", the Self, and identification, and disidentification.

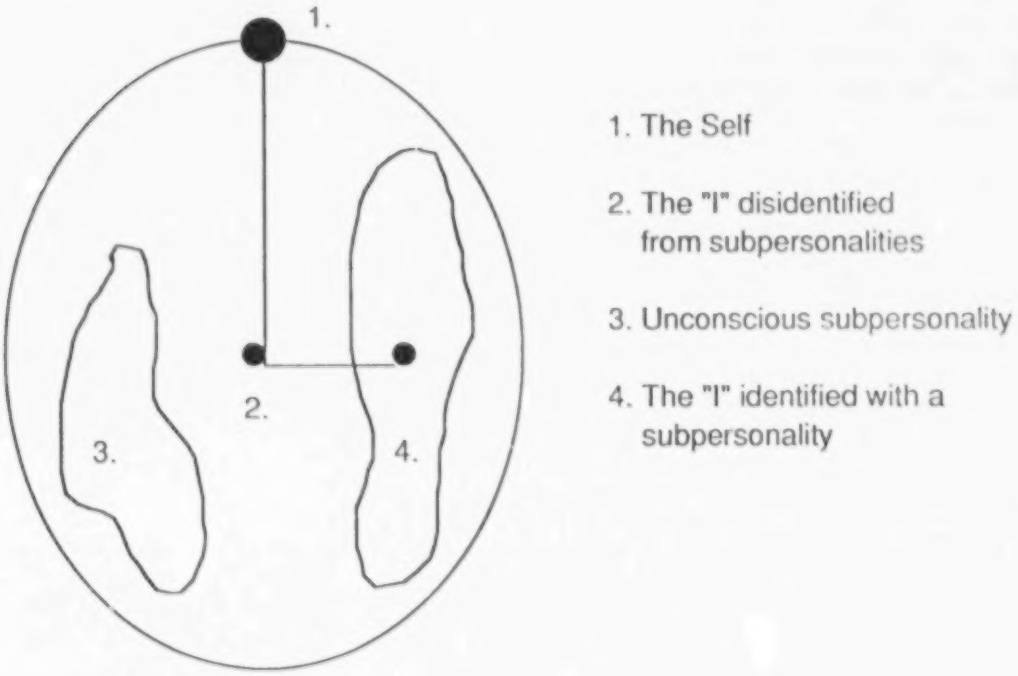

Figure 1. The psychosynthesis map of the psyche.

Brief Overview of Figure 1

In the psychosynthesis view of the functioning of the psyche, the Self (also transpersonal or spiritual Self) is the true center of a person's identity and individuality, containing all the unique qualities and capacities. Realization of the Self is the goal of psychosynthesis (Gordon, 1991); however, normal daily consciousness is not of the Self, but of the "I", which is the reflection of the Self at the level of the personality. The personality is composed of numerous subpersonalities, and the daily working arena of the "I" is among the subpersonalities. When the "I" is identified with a particular personality pattern or role, then the person would report "this is who I am", "this is what I am thinking and feeling". As internal or external forces cause the "I" to disidentify with one subpersonality and to identify with another, the person experiences a different perspective and its associated thoughts, feelings, and physical characteristics.

Subpersonalities

Though we are socialized to think of ourselves as uniform, whole personalities, Assagioli believed that there is a crowd within each of us made of recognizable patterns among the contents of our consciousness. In psychosynthesis these are called subpersonalities.

> Subpersonalities are psychological satellites, coexisting as a multitude of lives within the overall medium of our personality. Each subpersonality has a style and a motivation of its own, often strikingly dissimilar from those of the others....Each of us is a crowd. There can be the rebel and the intellectual, the seducer and the housewife, the saboteur and the aesthete, the organizer and the bon vivant--each with its own mythology, and all more or less comfortably crowded into one single person. (Ferrucci, 1982).

The notion of subpersonalities is familiar in many forms of daily parlance and in current psychological thinking. Subpersonalities may be recognizable as the different roles we move in and out of daily such as child, teacher, spouse, boss, parent, student, lover, or friend. Family of origin theorists point to the often times lasting influence of the childhood roles we played in our original family system: hero, scapegoat, lost child, or caretaker. Bradshaw and others find it useful to talk about these family roles and the child within whose unmet developmental needs require reparenting from the "good enough" parent within (Bradshaw, 1988). Another example of subpersonalities is Perl's "chair work", which involves identifying conflicting parts of a personality and encouraging a dialogue between them to clarify the different internal perspectives and hopefully resolve the conflict (Perls, 1969). A subpersonality that is familiar to many is the "critic"--the internal voice that can nag, doubt, judge, question, belittle, or shame.

Gordon (1991) gives another example of subpersonalites and the features that characterize them:

> For example, let's imagine a woman with a "busy bee" type subpersonality. When she is identified with this subpersonality she focuses her attention and energies to the tasks at hand, whether at home or at work. Her outward behavior is brisk and competent. She is well-organized, and relatively confident in dealing with the usual problems that may crop up. Her inward experience is one of being mentally focused and absorbed; her feeling experience is generally neutral, with some happiness at a minor success and some discouragement at a minor mistake.
>
> Let's say the same person, however, also has a "rejected child" subpersonality. The inner components of this subpersonality include: mentally, circular and emotionally-charged thoughts about the wrongs done to the person (child); emotionally, there are strong feelings, often of hurt, anger, sadness, and/or fear. The physical component includes a stooped or hunched posture, inhibition of freedom of movement, shallow or interrupted breathing, etc. The outward manifestation is extreme defensiveness, lack of energy, high sensitivity to criticism, demanding attention, and moving frequently into one-up or one-down relationships with others.
>
> A person with these two types of subpersonalities probably feels her life is functioning fairly well as long as the busy bee is in charge at her workplace and when there is work to be done at home. If the rejected child makes only brief appearances when the person has indeed been rejected, then she may sustain a sense of inner and outer balance in her life. The busy bee side is in control; it needs to maintain control in order to keep the child from erupting! But if she finds herself identified with the rejected child more frequently while working, if the busy bee

> side gets stymied by the rejected child and work relationships become stressed and more difficult, the person will start to experience increased pain and imbalance, emotional swings, deteriorating work relationships, etc. (Gordon, 1991).

In Figure 1 the elements labeled 3 and 4 could be the "busy bee" and the "rejected child", respectively. As we become aware of our changing internal states during the day, we may identify several active subpersonalities, so the internal crowd may be much more complex than the figure represents.

A final point about subpersonalities needs to be made. Psycho- synthesis believes that each subpersonality is composed of levels, the deepest of which is an underlying positive quality that emanates from the Self. An important part of subpersonality work is progressively attending to and reowning the needs, drives and qualities represented at the deeper levels. This work can help synthesize the personality "by reducing the polarization between the subpersonality and other parts of our personality." (Gordon, 1991)

The Self and the "I"

In psychosynthesis, the subpersonalities are not the sum total of a person's identity, although they often dominate waking consciousness and although other theories assume there is little more to the psyche than the subpersonalities. Psychosynthesis suggests that the Self is the true identity of the person, the source of the highest aspirations, qualities, potentials, and transpersonal meanings. Realization of this Self as the central and guiding element of human functioning is the goal of psychosynthesis. The subpersonality work of identifying, accepting, and understanding the active personality patterns is, however, the first essential step towards this goal (Gordon, 1991).

The "I", which is the reflection of the Self at the level of the personality, is a primary element in the dynamic of that work. The "I" is our everyday source of personal identity, the focused attention of our awareness. "I am excited", "I am tired", "I am thinking about applying for that job" are statements from the perspective of the "I". The role of the "I" is the synthesis of the subpersonalities in conjunction with the other elements and in service of the highest qualities of the Self. The "I" is the potential director of the cast of characters that comprise the personality.

Identification and Disidentification

The "I" is characterized by awareness and choice. The three foci of awareness for the "I" are the Self, itself as a distinct part of the psyche, and the subpersonalities. If the "I" has focused awareness of the Self (relatively rare in our culture), we can liken that awareness to Maslow's peak experiences. If the awareness of the "I" is of itself, the personal experience may be of centeredness, humility, strength, power, and clear awareness (Gordon, 1991). If the awareness of the "I" is focused on one of the subpersonalities, then the experience is of that personality pattern.

Which aspect of the psyche is attended to by the "I" depends on the ability of the "I" to choose to focus its attention. In psychosynthesis terms, the "I" can identify with and have awareness of the various elements of the psyche. How much ability the "I" has to consciously choose to identify among the elements of the psyche depends on awareness of that ability and practice. When the "I" consciously chooses to move awareness from one element to another, that process is called disidentification followed by identification. The following example by Gordon (1991) makes the point clearly:

> For example, a woman is riding on a bus, studying an article for a class in school. She is identified with an inner pattern that includes her intellect, her student role; she is focused, concentrating, wanting to absorb information and master it. Then a man sits down beside her. He gives her a big smile, and then makes a knowledgeable remark on the article she is reading. She realizes he is familiar with this work and she opens up to him a bit.
>
> She is still identified with the first subpersonality, but is starting to bridge into another part of herself, having to do with her

> relationships with men. Now let's say this woman has a history of having been abused and victimized by men, and has a subpersonality pattern based on that abuse and victimization. It sometimes expresses as extreme anger or hostility. But usually it expresses through a pattern of allowing people, especially men, to push inappropriately past normal social boundaries. This victim subpersonality pattern is based on pleasing people so they will like her and be nice to her so she will be safe, will feel good inside, and won't get hurt. So when the man on the bus asks her, "Do you live around here," she answers truthfully, "yes." When he says "Oh! Me too! Where do you live?" she almost starts to tell this person she doesn't know, exactly where she lives. Her sense of self, her "I" function, has unconsciously shifted from being identified with her focused student subpersonality to becoming identified with her pleaser/appeaser/victim subpersonality.
>
> At the last moment she becomes aware that she is feeling scared. Inwardly she steps away from the sense of having to appease the man, and moves towards her "I". She chooses not to disclose to this man information which is too personal to tell a stranger (Gordon, 1991).

This example shows how the "I" can unconsciously shift identification from one subpersonality to another, in this case triggered by the man's comments and questions. It also shows that by becoming aware of a feeling, the "I" can consciously step back (disidentify) from the subpersonality that, in this case, might have ended up recreating a pattern of appeasement and possible victimization.

Applications of Psychosynthesis Concepts to Adventure Counseling

Leader Attitudes and Assumptions

The basic attitudes and assumptions that facilitators bring with them to adventure group work affect the quality of the interpersonal climate that is created, the depth of the relationships that result, the development of the group, and the growth that occurs for the individual members.

Psychosynthesis adds at least two facets to the vast literature on the relationship between positive therapeutic outcomes and the personal characteriestics of facilitators or counselors. For example, the assumption that each group member's personality is composed of several subpersonalities helps a facilitator see beyond persistent, single dimension behavior to the likelihood that other aspects of the personality can and will be revealed when conditions in the group are right. Persistent, single dimension behavior such as aggression, withdrawal, overuse of humor, seductiveness, or caretaking can affect group development, especially if the behavior is seen as the true or central identity of the person. A subpersonality perspective allows the leader to accept the behavior as purposeful, to encourage that subpersonality to express itself and its needs clearly, to seek conditions that will satisfy those needs, and to see the positive quality that is at the core of the subpersonality. The work to identify, understand, and accept personality patterns on the part of the individual and on the part of the group in support of the individual, can strengthen the habit of disidentification and improve capacities for the "I" to be aware of patterns and to choose responsibly among the behavior options available among the subpersonalities.

The concepts and assumptions of psychosynthesis can be presented to a group as a model to apply to their behavior to explore its usefulness. The withdrawn and sullen behavior of a fifteen-year-old ropes course participant can then begin to be seen by the group as a part rather than the whole of the person. The group can learn to offer acceptance, support, and challenge as the individual works to express thoughts, feelings and needs to himself and to the group. The positive quality underlying the withdrawn subpersonality (perhaps the desire to look deep inside for a needed inner resource) can be looked for and encouraged by the group.

The concept of subpersonalities can also help the facilitator and group members see interaction patterns in the group. For example, scapegoat, boss, rescuer, placater, and clown roles can be played out by certain group members consistently and largely unconsciously. The group can use the subpersonality model

to step back from and examine the dynamic that has been established, without their awareness and choice, among these group subpersonalities. The group's understanding of the stages of group development and the needs of group members for power, control, dependence, or acceptance can be enhanced by using the concept of subpersonalities. The group can learn to integrate and synthesize its elements and resources in the service of the group's goals.

The facilitator can choose initiatives and challenges that will encourage the group to deal with subpersonality patterns and look for alternatives. In addition, well chosen activities can focus on an individual's need to work on an element of her personality. For example, the beam or the wall might expose gender-based personality patterns as assumptions are made unconsciously about the importance of physical strength to the solution of the task. If the males tend to take charge and the females tend to demur based on such assumptions, the opportunity to recognize, own, and examine roles, patterns, and subpersonalities is obvious and potentially powerful.

In doing edgework with a member of the group, the thoughts, feelings, and physiology of the S - 1 (success minus 1) subpersonality and the S + 1 (success plus 1) subpersonality can be highlighted, contrasted, examined, and applied to future chailenges (Nadler and Luckner,1991). If clipping in for a rappel elicits an "I can't do it, I'm no good" subpersonality that is persistent and disabling in a person's home, school, or work life, then brief subpersonality work can occur in that moment. If the group member can own the subpersonality and risk the rappel, then a success will elicit a different, contrasting subpersonality, the characteristics of which can be owned, examined, and celebrated. In this case, a dominant and disabling subpersonality can be put into perspective and a less active, success oriented subpersonality can be strengthened and encouraged. In a debrief, the potential of the "I" to be aware of personality patterns and to make conscious choices can be experienced and discussed.

Summary

This paper begins to describe psychosynthesis as a theory and to suggest how it applies to adventure counseling. Other aspects that could be described, in addition to spirituality include the uses of imagery and visualization, the relationship between group exercises and group development, specific initiatives and challenges that relate to the theory, and leader interventions and approaches to processing that fit well with the ideas in Nadler and Luckner's Processing the Experience (1991). It is not necessary the psychosynthesis be taken as the sole approach to adventure group facilitation; it is hoped, however, that facilitators, counselors, and leaders will further examine this theory and borrow freely ideas, exercises, and explanations that fit and enhance their current theoretical foundation and add to their effectiveness in the field.

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